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NICARAGUA/
FRANCE

LEHRER: Two weeks ago Washington was all aglow in the warmth and ceremony of Presidents Reagan of the United States and Mitterrand of France as they toasted and talked of their many mutual interests and affections. But today many had occasion to remember Mitterrand did point out then, and almost as an aside that there was some disagreement over Central America policy. That disagreement came dramatically to the surface with the release of a letter in Nicaragua. It's from French Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson and it offers French assistance in clearing mines from Nicaragua's harbors. The mines were put there by Contra guerrillas supported by the United States. And have caused damage to at least nine ships, including one Soviet tanker. This afternoon Nicaragua said it would accept French help to get rid of those mines. In Washington, State Department John Hughes had this to say about the French offer. JOHN HUGHES (State Dept. Spokesman): We have raised our concerns with the French. We have all along been concerned with the large Soviet and Cuban military relationship with Nicaragua. And we would not favor any nation's contributing to Nicaragua's ability to export revolution with impunity. Correspondent Charles *Kraus, as you regulars know, covers Central America for us. He's been nosing around on this story here in Washington today. Charles, the French say their offer is based solely on humanitarian reasons? Does that add up to you, based on what you've found out today? KRAUS: Well, there is not a lot of information available in Washington about the French offer. But I think you could say that the offer was made according to the French because humanitarian aid from Europe is not reaching the Nicaraguan people. And the French, as you pointed out, have a very different view of the situation in Central America and the reason for the political turmoil. They do not see it as a result of Cuban and Soviet influence once there. And I think, that it would be fair to say that the French probably are concerned that an East-West confrontation could arise if the situation in Central America is not calmed down. And I think they see the possibility of another Soviet tank or another Soviet ship being damaged by the mines in the Nicaraguan ports as the kind of thing that could lead to some sort of conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union.

MACNEIL: How serious have those incidents been in the harbor down there? Just in terms of what damage they may be doing to the Nicaraguan economy and also the possibility of what you say the French fear might happen? KRAUS: Well, we were down there a couple of months ago, and before the mining actually took place. And the Nicaraguan economy is in a very bad situation. There,

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there are shortages of food. The country depends on imports, many of them that come in by ship, really for its economic life, life, as well as exports, because it obviously exports a lot of agricultural commodities to Europe and the United States. So the situation there is bad. I talked with a high-ranking diplomat at the foreign ministry in Managua today. He described the situation as desperate. He said that the Nicaraguans feel they have a pistol pointed at their head and that they will take assistance from whatever country offers it to clear the mines out of those ports. It would be as if New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, New Orleans, were blockaded in this country. It is very serious.

MACNEIL: The U.S. response, we heard what John Hughes said. Is there anything more to add to that? KRAUS: Well, not really. I can't say that there is. Clearly the Reagan administration does not like the idea of the French clearing out those mines. It's interesting that at the same time Mr. Hughes says that he has no idea who's putting the mines in there, but the Nicaraguans have said for some time that the United States is engaged in an economic blockade of Nicaragua, in order to change the political situation there. I mean, officially, the rationale is that this is all designed to stop the Nicaraguans from sending arms to El Salvador, to the guerrillas in El Salvador. But President Reagan said in his interview with The New York Times a week or so ago, that in fact, the Reagan administration would like some changes in the internal situation in Nicaragua.

LEHRER: Well, I said, in introducing all this, that just as a matter of fact, that those mines were put in there by the Contra guerrillas who are being supported by the United States. There's no dispute about that really, is there? KRAUS: Well, the Contras have claimed that they did it.

LEHRER: Yeah. And nobody has claimed otherwise, other than the Nicaraguans who say that in fact it is the CIA rather than the Contras, who placed those mines. I think without getting into that, directly, once it is a matter of fact, that in order to place those kinds of sophisticated mines in the Nicaraguan courts, you would need some fairly sophisticated equipment to do it.

LEHRER: I hear you. Thank you, Charles. Robin?